

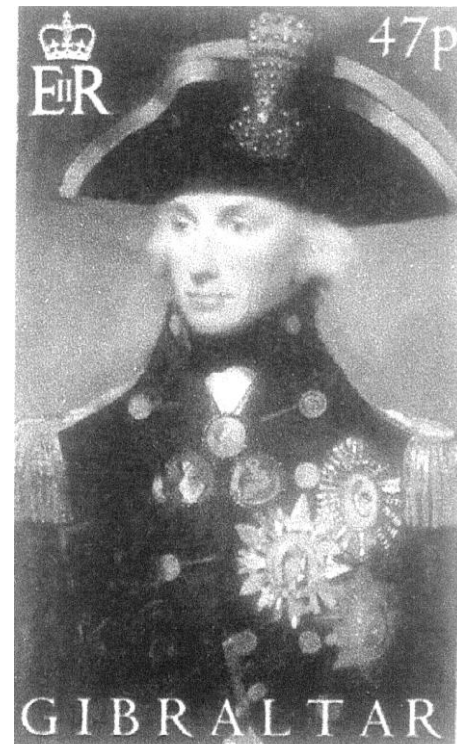
## The Chase

*Next month, 21<sup>st</sup> October, will be the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and the death of Horatio Nelson. This article gives the events leading to the battle.*

Vice Admiral Lord Nelson was appointed to command the Mediterranean Fleet, in the spring of 1803. On 18<sup>th</sup> August 1805 Nelson in HMS Victory, anchored off Portsmouth, having chased the French Fleet with Admiral Villeneuve in command, who manage to escape the blockade of Toulon on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 1805. Having heard the news, Nelson sailed with his Fleet for Alexandria arriving on 7<sup>th</sup> February to prevent the French Fleet from picking up the French Troops left after the Battle of the Nile and investigating ports and harbours in case the French Fleet had anchored in any of them. The French Fleet got as far as Greece and then turned back to the west as far as Tunis, turning east again to sail around Sicily and headed back to Toulon.

After Alexandria, Nelson sailed for Malta then to Sardinia. Meanwhile, whilst the search for the French Fleet was being carried out, Villeneuve was ordered to sea on the 30<sup>th</sup> March. On 7<sup>th</sup> April, Villeneuve anchored off Cartanga, and signalled for the Spanish warships in harbour to join him. The Spaniards asked for time to ammunition and store ships, not wishing to stop Villeneuve sailed and slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar, but were seen by the Captain of a frigate refitting at Gibraltar. By 9<sup>th</sup> April the French had arrived at Cadiz and was seen again by Admiral Orde and the five ships of the line who were blockading Cadiz harbour. Villeneuve signalled the one French ship and as many of the fifteen Spanish battleships as were ready for sea to join him. Just after noon he gave the order to weigh anchor, and sailed off in a westerly direction. When Orde's cruisers reappeared off Cadiz the next day the Combined Fleet had disappeared.

On the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> March Nelson's frigates lost sight of the French Fleet whilst Nelson was waiting off the coast of Sardinia, but on 4<sup>th</sup> April, Nelson learnt the French had escaped him, took station between Sardinia and the African Coast and remained there for twelve days. On the 18<sup>th</sup> April, Nelson learnt from a passing merchantman that the French had been seen off the Spanish coast eleven days before. Next day confirmation arrived that they had passed the Straits, been joined by the Spaniards and had sailed again without entering harbour. Nelson, then headed for Tetuan Bay (Morocco) arriving on 4<sup>th</sup> May and set to work



taking on provisions and water. Sailing next day the Fleet went to Gibraltar and stayed for 4 hours. Gathering all information possible Nelson decided that Villeneuve had sailed for the West Indies and not the English Channel. The next 24 hours were spent at Lagos Bay (Southern Portugal), making ready for a long voyage. On 9<sup>th</sup> May Nelson spoke with one of Orde's frigates, who had spoken to a vessel that had left Spithead on 27<sup>th</sup> April. Nothing had been heard of the French Fleet and Nelson was now sure that Villeneuve was headed for Martinique. By 14<sup>th</sup> May, Nelson with ten ships of the line and three frigates had reached Madeira in pursuit of the French and Spanish Fleet three thousand miles ahead of him.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> June, Nelson anchored at Barbados having gained 13 days upon the French and Spanish Fleet which had anchored at Martinique on 13<sup>th</sup> May. Two ships of the line joined Villeneuve, making his force to twenty sail of the line and seven frigates. Villeneuve instructions were to be in readiness for the arrival of the Brest fleet and at the same time to attack the British West Indian Islands. Quarrels broke between the French and Spanish Admirals, and the death of 3,000 men due to the unhealthy climate. As Nelson arrived, Villeneuve sailed northwards and captured a convoy and learnt that Nelson with twelve or fourteen ships and Admiral Cochrane with eight sail of the line were close at hand. The West Indies was saved, but danger now threatened Britain. Villeneuve orders were to proceed to Ferrol (North West coast of Spain), and to add fifteen French and Spanish ships to the Fleet, making thirty four or thirty five ships of the line, either to pass around Ireland for Texel (Netherlands) to join up with another seven ships, or to go up the English Channel to Boulogne, giving Napoleon the opportunity to cross the Channel. Meanwhile at Barbados, two ships joined the Fleet, bringing the number to twelve. Nelson was given false information by General Brereton, the Commanding Officer at St. Lucia, to the effect that the enemy had gone to attack Trinidad. Embarking troops he sailed south at Tobago, with the news being confirmed by an American ship who reported the enemy ahead. As he neared Trinidad, on 7<sup>th</sup> June Nelson saw outposts blazing on the heights, but on entering the Gulf of Paria he saw no hostile sail there. Nelson immediately turned north and on 12<sup>th</sup> June landed the troops at Antigua. At last he received news from the schooner Nelly that the French Fleet had passed to the north at Guadeloupe. That same night Nelson sent the brig Curieux to carry news of his coming and of the French movements to the Admiralty. On 13<sup>th</sup> June Nelson weighed anchor and followed. On 17<sup>th</sup> July Nelson made his landfall at Cape St. Vincent (Southern Portugal) having crossed the Atlantic in thirty-four days and passing Rear Admiral

Collingwood who was blockading Cadiz. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July having revictualled the fleet at Tetouan, Nelson once again headed for the Atlantic and turned northwards, towards the English Channel, delayed by head winds on the Portuguese coast. Meanwhile the British squadrons were assembling in the path which Napoleon had ordered Villeneuve to take. On 9<sup>th</sup> August, discovering the French and Spanish Fleet were in Ferrol, Admiral Calder sailed northwards and on 14<sup>th</sup> August, joined Admiral Cornwallis off Ushant. He was also joined a few hours later by Rear Admiral Stirling. At 6pm the next evening the Channel Fleet already twenty-seven sail of the line was joined by Nelson with twelve more, after learning on the 13<sup>th</sup>, whilst bound for the Scillies that Ireland was safe. As darkness fell on the 15<sup>th</sup> Villeneuve abandoned the enterprise and fled for Cadiz.

On 18<sup>th</sup> August, Nelson in HMS Victory anchored off Portsmouth. After all the formalities Nelson ordered a chaise and set off the next evening for Merton, his home. The following day he visited the Admiralty, navy agents and the navy office, also visiting the office of William Pitt, the Prime Minister, who made it clear that Nelson's services would be required.

On the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> September the Euryalus (frigate), Captain Blackwood, anchored off the Needles and landed at Lymington. He hired a chaise and set off for Merton to give Nelson the news that the French and Spanish Fleet were at Cadiz, before travelling to the Admiralty.

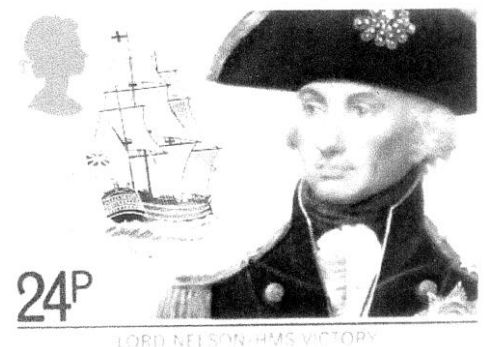
## The Battle of Trafalgar - 21st October 1805

Early morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1805 Admiral Nelson was at his home at Merton, after chasing the French and Spanish Fleet under the command



of Admiral Villeneuve, all over the Mediterranean and the West Indies and back, a voyage of 14,000 miles, when he received news that the enemy fleet was at Cadiz (south west Spain).

On the night of 13<sup>th</sup> September Nelson travelled to Portsmouth and boarded the HMS *Victory* on the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup>, weighing anchor on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup>, arriving off Lisbon on 25<sup>th</sup>, and sent messages to the



British Consulate to keep his arrival a secret, and to Vice Admiral Collingwood, not to hoist his colours on his arrival. Nelson and *Victory* joined the fleet off Cadiz on 28<sup>th</sup> September. Two days after his arrival it was Nelson's forty-seventh birthday, when he entertained his flag officers and captains to dinner, and laid his plans for destroying the enemy. To maintain the fleet off Cadiz required him to send ships to the Straits to reprovision and water. The first detachment of six sail of the line left almost immediately, leaving Nelson with only twenty six sail of the line. Nelson moved his fleet fifty miles out into the Atlantic, where he could guard against surprise from the north and control the entrance of the Straits of Gibraltar. The task of watching the enemy was left to the frigates and a linking division of the faster seventy four gun sail of the line, which maintained hourly communications by flag and gun. By withdrawing, Nelson hoped to tempt Villeneuve out, but unknown to the British, Villeneuve was preparing for sea. On the 28<sup>th</sup> September Villeneuve had received orders from Napoleon to sail for Cartanga and Naples, but on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October just as they were about to sail, rumours reached Cadiz of Nelson's arrival. Immediately the port was in a tumult and the order to sail was suspended. All hands were diverted to arming the harbour guard with gunboats. With Villeneuve's failure to sail, hopes for a fight fell very low in the fleet. In the meantime HMS *Royal Sovereign* arrived from England after a refit.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> October after new orders reached Nelson, he issued instructions to his flag officers and captains, the plan already outlined to them verbally, in the two evenings in his cabin and committed them in writing. Knowing that the usual battle was carried out with the ships in line ahead, Nelson proposed to attack the French and Spanish Fleet from abeam (approaching them at right angles) - one column to break the line at the twelfth ship in line, the other column to break through the rear section. Intelligence forced Villeneuve's hand, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> October, two factors favoured him making a break - the wind was in his favour and he was to be superseded as Commander -in-Chief. Captain Blackwood in HMS *Euryalus* observed the unmistakable signs of the French and Spanish ships preparing for sea and he sent a signal to Nelson.



By the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> October, the combined enemy fleet of thirty

three ships of the line was at sea, and had been in sight since dawn, silhouetted against the early light. At 7.20am Nelson ordered his ships to form two columns as planned and to sail on the given course of east-north-east, and a little later the signal was given to "*prepare for battle*". There were concerns about Nelson's safety and it was suggested that his flag be transferred because *Victory* was so well known as his ship and would be a target for every gunner and sharpshooter who would pack the rigging. It was also suggested that he should change his coat to conceal the orders on his chest but he said there was no time. Shortly before 11am Nelson went below, after measuring the distance to the enemy, who were very close, he wrote in his diary his prayer.

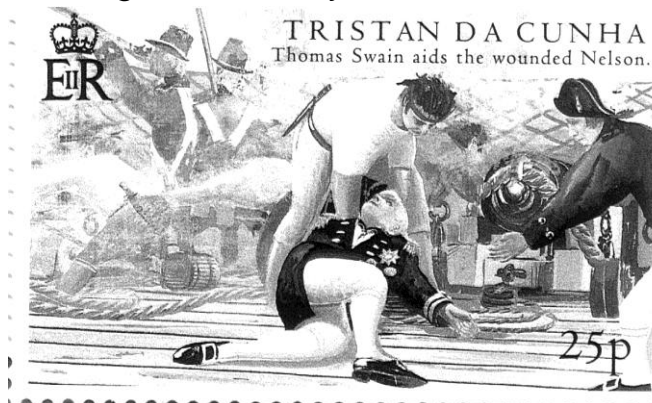
*May the great God, whom I worship,  
Grant to my country and for the benefit of Europe in general,  
A great and glorious victory, and may no misconduct,  
In anyone, tarnish it; and may humanity after victory be the  
Predominant feature in the British Fleet.*

*For my self individually,  
I commit my life to Him who made me and may His blessing  
Light upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully.  
To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted to me to  
defend.*

*Amen. Amen. Amen*

Back on the quarterdeck, Nelson recognized that the first ranging shots would soon be fired. He said to his signals officer, Lieutenant John Pasco, that he wished to amuse the fleet with a special signal and it would read "*England confides that every man will do his duty*". With little time left, it was suggested that it be changed to "*England expects that every man will do his duty*", as "*confides*" would need eight separate flags to spell it out, but a single code-flag existed for the word "*expects*". The two divisions were like two spears still heading east-north-east at the four mile long enemy line about ten miles off the Spanish coast. For most of its length the line was no line at all with as many as three ships abreast of each other. At 11.30am it was clear that Collingwood's southern division would strike first. Nelson's flag was seen in the van of the enemy line before smoke blanketed the identity of all but the nearest vessels, four of the enemy ships fired at the *Victory* as she sailed towards them with all sails set, gun ports open and guns run out. As the *Victory* closed on the line of ships, the range was established and half a dozen of the enemy ships began to fire broadsides, not all accurately. In a moment, *Victory's* mizzen top mast was down and trailing rigging across her deck, the tiller ropes were cut and the wheel was smashed. Eventually they smashed through the enemy line between the

*Bucentaure*, Villeneuve's flagship, and the *Redoubtable*. In passing they fired a broadside, which blew the stem in, killing and disabling at least one-third of the *Bucentaure's* crew. *Victory* drifted slowly away still clutched by the *Redoubtable*, firing starboard broadsides into her and a port broadside into *Santissima Trinidad* - both enemy ships giving the *Victory* a pounding. The *Redoubtable's* Captain did not believe in gunnery duels and closed all his gun ports, favouring pikes and cutlass supported with grenades. The close engagement meant devastating fire from aloft, an armed party with grappling irons ready for boarding the *Victory*. At about 1.15pm Nelson and Captain Hardy were still pacing the Quarterdeck, when a single sharpshooter identified a small man in a tricorne hat and glittering orders through the smoke - he took aim and squeezed the trigger. The ball struck Nelson on the left shoulder, pierced his chest and lodged in his spine, with a fragment of epaulette gold braid adhering to it. As Nelson slipped to the deck, Hardy noted his absence - he turned and saw Nelson had fallen on his right side - few men had witnessed the tragedy. He was taken to the sick bay at the bottom of the ship by two seaman, with his face covered so he would not be recognised. Nelson kept asking for Hardy, but received a message that Hardy would come at the first opportunity. Hardy visited



an hour after Nelson was wounded and informed Nelson that they had twelve or fourteen ships in their possession and then left, returning later to tell Nelson that they had won a great victory. Nelson, in almost his last words "*In a few minutes I will be no more*", his speech

was very soft, and said to Hardy "*Don't throw me overboard*". Hardy was on his knees when Nelson asked him to kiss him, and said "*Now I am satisfied. Thank God, I have done my duty*". At 4.30pm with the British victory complete Nelson died. Now there was no holding back from the Fleet the news of the loss of their beloved Commander-in-Chief.

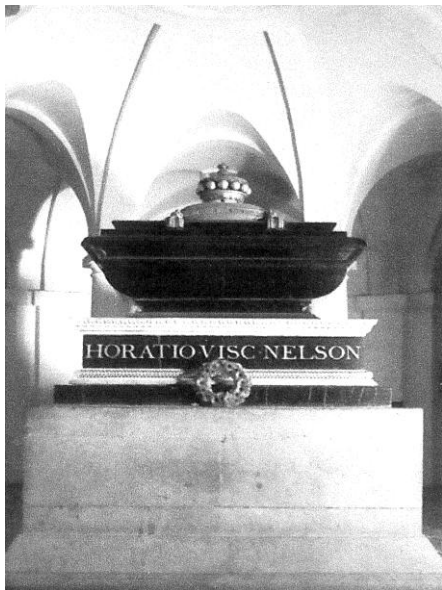
## **After the Battle of Trafalgar**

Vice Admiral Collingwood took over as the Commander of the Fleet, on hearing the news of Nelson's death. The conflict of feeling from elation at annihilating the enemy and satisfying expectations of prize money, to grief and a sense of loss, caused additional strain on men stunned and weary from the fight. Few men had long to contemplate their survival,

gain or loss. The seas continued to rise in the early evening, and during the night a storm hit the Fleet - neither side was equipped to meet it, with rigging, masts and sails, not cleared from the decks. Tow ropes snapped and many of the prizes slipped away in the darkness and were lost. *HMS Victory* was one of the worst damaged, the struggle for survival against the storm was as bad as the previous afternoon.

Several of the French and Spanish ships were scattered and never recovered. Others were swept on to the lee shore - the French *Indomptable*, with 500 survivors from the *Bucentaure* onboard, was lost, with one thousand French drowned struggling to reach shelter. Collingwood now ordered other ships to be scuttled and burned, amongst those was the *Santissima Trinidad* (130 guns) - thus the net loss to the French and Spanish was twenty two ships out of thirty three ships engaged by Nelson - only four prizes were taken into possession.

Collingwood's dispatch composed during the storm brought the first news of Trafalgar to England. The schooner, *HMS Pickle*, reached Falmouth in eight days, the Captain, a Lieutenant, drove straight to London, 265 miles in 37 hours and the news was in the First Lord of the Admiralty's hands by one o'clock in the morning and the King's at dawn.



Meanwhile *HMS Victory*, with Nelson's body which was placed in a barrel of brandy, remained on board for the tow by *HMS Northumberland* to Gibraltar for repairs. Whilst in Gibraltar a coffin was made from the mast of *L'Orient* which was lead lined. Nelson's body was transferred to the coffin, which was then filled with spirits of wine and completely sealed, and was replaced on board the *Victory*.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1805, *HMS Victory* sailed for Portsmouth, arriving at Spithead a month later. A week later *Victory* sailed for Sheerness (Kent), where Nelson's body was transferred to the Commissioners yacht for conveyance to Greenwich. On the 8<sup>th</sup> January 1806, Nelson's body was taken up the river Thames to the Admiralty by barge, with a naval escort. Nelson's funeral procession from the Admiralty to St. Paul's Cathedral was magnificent, the head of the procession reaching its destination before the rear had started to move. Nelson's body was laid in a marble sarcophagus, made for Cardinal Wolsey, set on a pedestal in the crypt.

**William Sagrott**